

*A NIGHT IN
AVIGNON*


CALE YOUNG RICE

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A NIGHT IN AVIGNON

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BY

CALE YOUNG RICE

Author of Charles Di Tocca, David,
Plays and Lyrics, etc.



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TO
DONALD ROBERTSON

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A NIGHT IN AVIGNON

CHARACTERS

FRANCESCO PETRARCA . . . *A Young Poet and Scholar*

GHERARDO *His Brother, a Monk*

LELLO *His Friend*

ORSO *His Servant*

FILIPPA	}	<i>Ladies of light life in Avignon</i>
SANCIA	}	

MADONNA LAURA

A NIGHT IN AVIGNON

SCENE: *A room in the chambers of PETRARCA at Avignon. It opens on a loggia overlooking, on higher ground, the spired church of Santa Clara and the gray cloisters of a Carthusian monastery. Beyond lie the city walls under glamour of the blue Provençal night.*

The room, faintly frescoed, is lighted with many candles; some glittering on a wine-table heavy with wines toward the right front. A door on the left leads to other rooms, and an arrased one opposite,

down to the street. Bookshelves and a writing-desk strewn with a lute and writings are also on the left; a crimson couch is in the centre; and garlands of myrtle and laurel deck the wine-table.

GHERARDO, *the monk, is seated by the desk, following with severe looks the steps of PETRARCA, who is walking feverishly to and fro.*

Gherardo (after a pause). Listen. Another word, Francesco.

Petrarca.

Aih!

And then another—that will breed another.

Gherardo. Dote on this Laura still—if still you must:

Woman's your destiny.

But quench these lights and set away that
wine.

Petrarca. And to no other lips turn? hers
denied me?

Never, Gherardo!

Gherardo. Virtue bids you.

Petrarca. Vainly!

I've borne until I will not . . . For it is
Two years now since in the aisles
Of Santa Clara yonder my heart first
Went from me on mad wings.
Two years this April morning
Since it fell fluttering before her feet . . .
As she stood there beside our blessed Lady,
Gowned as young Spring in green and
violets! . . .

Gherardo. And these two years have been
inviolate;

Your life as pure as hers,

As virgin—

Save for the songs you've sung to her;
those songs

This idle city echoes with. But now——

Petrarca. Now I will open all the gates to
Pleasure!

To rosy Pleasure—warm, unspiritual,

Ready to spring

Into the arms of all

Whom bloodless Virtue pales.

For, of restraint and hoping, I have drunk

But a vintage of tears!

And what has been my gain?

Gherardo.

Her chastity.

Petrarca. A chastity unchallenged of desire—

And therefore none!

Aih, none!

For, were it other;

Could I aver that once, that ever once

Her lids had fallen low in fear of love,

I'd bid the desert of my heart burn dry—

To the last oasis—

With resignation!

But never have they, never! and I'm mad.

(Pours out wine.)

Gherardo. And you will seek to cure it with
more madness?

To cast the devil of love out of your veins

With other love and lower!

Petrarca. Yes, yes, yes! (*drinks.*)

With little Sancia's!

Whose soul is a sweet sin!

Who lives but for this life and asks of

Death

Only a breath of time before he ends it,

To tell three beads and fill her mouth with

aves.

Just for enough, she says,

"To tell God that He made me"—as He
did.

Gherardo. And to blaspheme with! O ob-
sessèd man.

(*Has risen, flushed.*)

But you will fail! For this vain revelry

Will ease not. And I see all love is base—

As say the Fathers—

All! . . . and the body of woman

Is vile from the beginning.

Petrarca.

Monkish lies!

(Drinks again for courage.)

The body of woman's born of bliss and
beauty.

Only one thing is fairer—that's her soul.

Gherardo. And is that Word which says thou
shalt not look

Upon another's wife a monkish lie?

(Silence.)

Your Laura is another's.

Petrarca (torn).

As I found!

After my heart became a poison flame—

Within me!

A fierce inquisitor against my peace!
After I followed her from Santa Clara,
That mass-hour,
To an escutcheoned door!
After and not before . . . And such another's!
Ugo di Sade's!
A beast whose sullen mind two thoughts
would drain;
Whose breath is a poltroon's;
Who is unkind. . . . I've seen her weep;
who loves
Her not. . . . And yet the fane of song I
frame her,
The love I burn on it, she laughs away.
To hide her own? . . . I will not so believe.

Gherardo. Nor should you.

Petrarca. Yet you bid me quarry still

The deeps of me to shrine her?

And be Avignon's laughter?

A mock, a titter on the tongue of geese

That gad the city gates?

A type of fools that sigh while others kiss?

"Francesco Petrarca!

Who never clasped his mistress—but in a
sonnet!

Who fills empty canzone with his passion—
But never her ears!

Never!—though she was wed against her
will

To an unlettered boor out bartering—

One whom she well could leave!" . . .

I'll not, Gherardo! . . . Sonnets?

(Tears several from desk.)

Vain, all! . . .

(Casts them away.)

But Lello comes! and brings me Sancia!

Filippa! merry Filippa and Sancia!

We'll drink!—wine of Rocella!

Wine of the Rhine! Bielna! San Porciano!—

And kiss!

(Throws back his head.)

Kiss with the lips of life and not of . . .

(A knell has begun to beat from the church

without. He hears it, and, awed,

sinks, crossing himself, to the couch.)

(GHERARDO, exalted, shudders.)

Gherardo. It is the knell of Matteo Banista,

Whose soul is gone for its licentious days

Upon steep purgatory.

(Prepares to go.)

Your sin be on you . . . and it will.

Petrarca (fearful).

No! . . . no!

(Starts up.)

But hear, Gherardo, hear!

(His words come stifled.)

There in the cloister have you peace—in
prayer?

In visions—penances? . . .

Swear that you have! swear to me! once!

. . . but once!

And I . . . ! . . .

No, never! . . . never!

(He wipes his brow.)

While we are in the world the world's in us.

The Holy Church I own—

Confess her Heaven's queen;

But we are flesh and all things that are fair

God made us to enjoy—

Or, high in Paradise, we'll know but
sorrow.

You though would ban earth's beauty,

Even the torch of Glory

That kindled Italy once and led great
Greece—

The torch of Plato, Homer, Virgil, all

The sacred bards and sages, pagan-born!

I love them! they are divine!

And so to-night . . . ! . . .

(Voices.)

They! it is Lello! Lello! Sancia!——

(Hears a lute and laughter below, then a call, "Sing, Sancia"; then SANCIA singing:)

To the maids of Saint Remy

All the gallants go for pleasure;

To the maids of Saint Remy—

Tripping to love's measure!

To the dames of Avignon

All the masters go for wiving;

To the dames of Avignon—

That shall be their shriving!

(He goes to the Loggia as they gayly applaud. Then LELLO cries:)

Lello. Ho-ho! Petrarca! Pagan! are you
in?

What! are you sonnet-monger?

Petrarca.

Ai, ai, aih!

(Motions GHERARDO—who goes.)

Lello. Come then! Your door is locked!

down! let us in!

(Rattles it.)

Petrarca. No, ribald! hold! the key is on the
sill!

Look for it and ascend!

(ORSO enters.)

Stay, here is Orso!

*(The old servant goes through and down
the stairs to meet them. In a moment
the tramp of feet is heard and they
enter—LELLO between them—singing:)*

Guelph! Guelph! and Ghibbeline!

Ehyo! ninni! onni! ōnz!

I went fishing on All Saints' Day

And—caught but human bones!

I went fishing on All Saints' Day.

The Rhone ran swift, the wind blew black!

I went fishing on All Saints' Day—

But my love called me back!

She called me back and she kissed my

lips—

Oh, my lips! Oh, onni! ōnz!

“Better take life than death,” said she,

Better take love than—bones! bones!

(SANCIA *kisses* PETRARCA.)

Better take love than bones.”

(*They scatter with glee and PETRARCA seizes*

SANCIA to him.)

Petrarca. Yes, little Sancia! and you, my
friends!

Warm love is better, better!

And braver! Come, Lello! give me your
hand!

And you, Filippa! No, I'll have your lips!

Sancia (interposing). Or—less? One at a
time, Messer Petrarca!

You learn too fast. Mine only for to-night.

Petrarca. And for a thousand nights, Sancia
fair!

Sancia. You hear him? Santa Madonna!
pour us wine,

To pledge him in!

Petrarca. The tankards bubble o'er!

(They go to the table.)

And see, they are wreathed of April,
With loving myrtle and laurel intertwined.
We'll hold symposium, as bacchanals!

Sancia. And that is—what? some dull and
silly show

Out of your sallow books?

Petrarca. Those books were writ
With ink of the gods, my Sancia, upon
Papyri of the stars!

Sancia. And—long ago?

Ha! long ago?

Petrarca. Returnless centuries!

Sancia (contemptuously). Who loves the past,
loves mummies and their dust—

And he will mould!

Who loves the future loves what may not be,
And feeds on fear.

Only one flower has Time—its name is
Now!

Come, pluck it! pluck it!

Lello. *Brava, maid! the Now!*

Sancia (dancing). Come, pluck it! pluck it!

Petrarca. By my soul, I will!

(Seizes her again.)

It grows upon these lips—and if to-night
They leant out over the brink of Hell, I
would.

(She breaks from him.)

Filippa. Enough! the wine! the wine!

Sancia. O ever-thirsty

And ever-thrifty Pippa! Well, pour out!

(*She lifts a brimming cup.*)

We'll drink to Messer Petrarca—

Who's weary of his bed-mate, Solitude.

May he long revel in the courts of Venus!

All (drinking). Aih, long!

Petrarca. As long as Sancia enchants them!

Filippa. I'd trust him not, Sancia. Put him

to oath.

Sancia. And, to the rack, if faithless? This

Filippa!

Messer Petrarca, should she not be made

High Jurisconsult to our lord, the Devil,

Whose breath of life is oaths? . . .

But, swear it! . . . by the Saints!

Who were great sinners all!

And by the bones of every monk or nun
Who ever darkened the world!

Lello. Or ever shall!

(*A pause.*)

Petrarca. I'll swear your eyes are singing
Under the shadow of your hair, mad Sancia,
Like nightingales in the wood.

Sancia. Pah! Messer Poet . . .
Such words as those you vent without an
end—

To the Lady Laura!

Petrarca. Stop!

(*Grows pale.*)

Not *her* name—here!

(*All have sat down; he rises.*)

Sancia. O-ho! this air will soil it? and it might

Not sound so sweet in sonnets ever after?

(To the rest—rising:)

Shall we depart, that he may still indite
them?

‘To Laura—On the Vanity of Pas-
sion’?

“To Laura—Unrelenting”?

“To Laura—Whose Departing Darkens
the Sky”?

(Laughs.)

“To Laura—Who Deigns Not a Single
Tear”?

(ORSO enters.)

Shall we depart?

Lello.

Peace! Sancia.

Sancia.

Ah—ha!

(*Moves away.*)

Petrarca (*still tensely—to ORSO*). Speak.

Orso. Sir, you are desired.

Petrarca. By whom?

Orso. Her veil

Was lifted and she told me:

Therefore I say it out—Madonna Laura.

(*All stare, amazed. Silence.*)

Petrarca (*hoarsely*). What lie is this!

Orso. I am too old to lie.

Sancia (*laughing*). Who was the goddess that

his books tell of,

The cold one so long chaste, but who at

last——

Lello. Be silent, Sancia! Francesco . . . what?

Petrarca (*to ORSO*). Lead Monna Laura here——

(ORSO goes.)

If it is she! . . .

But you, my friends, must know how
strange this is,

And how—! . . . I have no words! . . .

Wait me, I pray you, yonder, in that
chamber.

*(They go, left, SANCIA shrugging. Then
ORSO brings LAURA, whom PETRARCA
is helpless to greet, and who falters—
yet nobly determining, comes down.)*

Laura. Messer Petrarca, . . . I have been im-
pelled

To come . . . and as the purest should,
boldly,

With lifted veil, to say . . .

Petrarca.

Lady!

Laura.

To say—

(Of gratitude I cannot give another . . .

For life to a woman is but resignation,

And that at last is shame) . . .

Petrarca.

At last . . . shame——

Laura. To say—Love is to us as light to the
lilies

That lean by Mont Ventoux.

The love of one pure man for one pure
woman.*Petrarca (dazed).* Lady! . . .*Laura.*

Yes, and—I've been

unkind to you.

Ungentle ever.

(Shakes her head.)

But there's no other way sometimes for
those

Who would be wholly true.

And yet . . . do I owe *any* truth to *him*?

Petrarca. To—Ugo di Sade?

Laura (bitterly). Who is called my husband?

How I was bound to him, you know! and
how

I've dwelt and have endured more than his
bursts

Of burning cruelty. For still, I thought,
He is my husband!

And still—He is my husband! . . .

But now no more I think it—oh! no more!

Too visible it is

That he belongs to any—who sell love.

So I may innocently say to you
Who for two years have sung my name
and suffered,

Yet never once have turned unto another—

(PETRARCA *pales.*)

I well may say . . .

(*Stopped by his manner.*)

There's something that you . . . Ah!

(*Sees, stricken, his grief and shame. Then
her glance goes round the room and falls
on the wine-table . . . Then SANCIA is
heard within.*)

Sancia. Well, well, Messer Petrarca! How
long will

You shut us in this dark—that is as black
As old Pope John the twenty-second's soul?

A pretty festa, this!

Petrarca (brokenly). Merciless God!

(Falls abased before LAURA'S look, tortured with remorse.)

O lady, what have I done beyond repair! . . .

(She gathers her veil.)

What have I lost within this gulf of shame!

For a paltry pleasure have I sold my dream,

Whose pinions would have lifted you at last?

Laura (very pale). I did not know, Messer

Petrarca, you

Had friends awaiting.

(Pauses numbly.)

I came to-night, as first I would have said,

With holy gratitude—

For a love I thought you gave.

With gratitude that honor well could
speak,

I thought, and yet be honor;

With gratitude forgetful of all else . . .

And trusting . . . But no matter:

All trust shall be embalmed and laid
away.

I go with pity; seeing

My husband—is even as other men.

*(She passes to the door and out: PETRARCA
moans. Then LELLO enters and comes
to him anxiously.)*

Lello. Francesco!

Petrarca. Lello!

(*Dazed.*)

Lello! Have I dreamed?

(*Rising, with anguish.*)

Did Laura come to me out of the night—

Come as the first voice breaking beyond

death

To one despairing? . . .

And was I lifted up to Heaven's dawn?

And then . . .

(*Reels.*)

God! am I falling . . . ? shall I ever . . . ?

Down this . . . ? . . . My friend stay

with me!

No, go . . . and take them with you—

Sancia—all! . . .

I have slain the Spring forever!

The green of the whole fair world! . . . O

Laura! Laura!

*(Sinks down on the couch and buries his face
in his arms. LELLO goes sorrowfully
out.)*

THE END.

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